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Growth and Development of Oriental Libraries in India

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Introduction

Libraries have always had a pivotal role in the storage, processing, and dissemination of information. Some may serve general needs, but special libraries serve the needs of a particular community of users. Among special libraries, Oriental libraries hold an important place because they preserve the cultural heritage of a nation or a civilization.

Oriental Libraries

“Oriental Libraries” are those libraries that have literature pertaining to Oriental studies and languages. “Oriental” in this context refers to the ancient Near East, including India, Persia (Iran), and ancient Arabia, among other places, and the languages and literatures of those places and peoples.

Growth and Development of Oriental Libraries in India

India is a vast repository of different cultures, both because it was invaded by a number of foreign countries and peoples, and because of its contacts with people from the East. The languages from those Eastern countries are part of Indian literature. The literature in those Eastern languages created India's Oriental libraries. Their history can be traced back to the Vedic period, when the written literature was kept in Ashrams or Gurukuls. Gurukuls were mostly located peaceful forest environments. With the passage of time, Gurukuls were also established in cities.

Jain and Buddhist Era

Taxila was one of the famous educational centres where students came from different parts of the country. Varanasi also distinguished itself by having a large number of Gurukulas. During this period, the literature was preserved in the Sutra style of composition. Buddhist and Jain Monastries acted as repositories of knowledge, for religious literature as well as other types. Monastic Oriental Libraries were also called Viharas. Over time, these Viharas developed into institutions of higher learning. A federation of Viharas constituted a Mahavihara, which was a larger educational institutional institution. Nalanda Mahavihara is the best example. Fa-Hien, a Chinese traveler, also found a number of monastries in India. Kanyakubja, Sravasti, Kusunagara, Vaisali, and Patliputra were centres of Oriental literature

according to Fa-Hien. Hiuen-Tsang, another Chinese traveler, visited India during 629-645 A.D. He left a detailed account of his visit, which gives us significant information about Buddhist educational institutions possessing a rich variety of Eastern literature.

Taxila was a center of learning in Ancient India and a large number of people from all over the world and the subcontinent itself visited this place to gain knowledge. Literature related to medicine and archery enriched the library at Taxila. According to Rahula Sankrityayana, Angiris set up a seminary with a Granthakuti (Library) attached to it at Taxila, which later flourished in to an academy or university. Nalanda University is the best known of ancient India 's universities. It has been called the treasure house of information by European archeologists. The information there helped locate Buddhist shrines in India. It is believed that King Kumara Gupta (AC 415-455) built the first monastery at Nalanda to train Buddhist monks. Nalanda University was an expansion of this seminary. King Buddha Gupta (AC455-467), Jagatha Gupta (AC 467-500), Baladitya (500-525), and Vijra (525) made additions and expansions to the building. There were three large libraries with vast amount of literature in Oriental languages on subjects such as science, medicine, astrology, fine arts, literature (Weeraratne, n.d). The University of Valabhi was built by the Maitraka Kings during the years 475-775 A.D. Its library had a variety of Eastern literature. This great university and its library lasted until the 12th century, when they were completely destroyed by Arab invaders. Odantapuri University was founded by King Gopala (660-705) and was a well-known center of learning. It had a library that was rich in Brahmanical and Buddhist works. Mohammad Bakhtiyar Khilji destroyed this monastic university along with its library (Weeraratne, n.d). Somapuri also possessed a wealth of Oriental literature, but it was destroyed by fire in the middle of the 11th century. Vikramasila monastery, built by King Dharmapala (775-800 A.D), had a variety of literature on metaphysics, tantras, grammar, ritualism, and logic. The library fulfilled the demands of outsiders, especially those from Tibet, by providing them copies of manuscripts in a most liberal way. Another University with a significant Oriental collection, especially in Tantric Buddhism, was Jagaddala, founded by King Ramapala (1077-1129) (Weeraratne, n.d). Another monastery with a rich wealth on different aspects of Oriental literature was Kanheri University, built during the reign of Amoghavarsha (Kielhorn, n.d).

By the 10th century, the corpus of Jain literature had increased many times, and Jain monks had contributed substantially to nearly all branches of knowledge known at that time. The Jayendra monastery of Kashmir had a good library where the Chinese traveler Hiuen–Tsang spent two years copying manuscripts. Similarly, he spent fourteen months at the Chinapati monastery. Several Hindu kings and their ministers, who flourished between 10th and 12th centuries AD, are credited with establishing libraries and supporting the library movement. Among them was King Bhoja of Dhara, who flourished in the 11th century, and was a distinguished scholar with a rich library. (Rama Rao, 1987). King Kumarapaladeva of the Chaulakyas is said to have established 21 Jain Libraries. He kept a copy of Kalpasutra written in golden ink in each one of them.

Mughal Empire

When the Muslims established their rule in India at the beginning of the 13th century, Muslim emperors paid special attention to libraries, taking care to establish libraries in educational institutions. They constructed no separate library buildings; rather, books were deposited and preserved in educational institutions, mosques, and Khangahs. Many Muslim rulers were from the East, and they helped enrich libraries with Oriental literature. Paper began be used as a writing material in the 12th century, and this helped book production in this periods. Mughal sovereigns and their courtiers were educated and accomplished, and some maintained personal libraries. The Muslim sovereigns collected and preserve the Vedas, the Ramayana, and other Hindu religious books. They also translated a variety of books in Hindi in to Persian and Arabic, and helped disseminate Hindu art and culture.

After the establishment of Sultans of Delhi in 1202, a new period in the history of Oriental libraries came in to existence. These minor Muslim rulers and nobles encouraged Islamic learning and established maktabs (primary schools), madrasas (schools of higher learning), libraries, and mosques. They encouraged Arabic and Persian literatures in all branches of learning, and enriched Oriental literature in the libraries. They gave shelter and protection to scholars, who brought literature from other parts of the

world to India. The Library of [Khwajah Nizam-ud-din Auliya](#) was an important Oriental library. It was the property of the [Waqf](#) (religious board) and was open to every man of letters. During the reign of the Khilji dynasty the number of Oriental libraries increased. Jala-ud-din Khiljee established the Imperial Library at Delhi and appointed Amir Khusru as its librarian.

The [Tughluq](#) Dynasty opened a new chapter in the history of Oriental libraries in India. Mohammad Tughluq built one thousand madrasas, each with a library with collections in Arabic and Persian. Humayun ascended the throne in 1530 and a library known as Khan-i-Tilism. Humayun's library played a significant role in Mughal history. Akbar, the greatest of Mughal emperors maintained a very rich library. He added a sizable number of books, obtained from his conquest, from libraries in Gujrat, Jaunpur, Kashmir, Bihar, Bengal, and the Deccan. His library was unique in its collection of rare books, among which was the Persian *Divan of Human Shah*. By the time of Akbar's grandson, Shah Jahan, the library was a complex organization with a large staff, and headed by Nazim, a noble of the court. In Kashmir, a picture of the first library is found in the Shrine of Hazrat Bulbul Shah, which was established by Muslims. A magnificent monastery and mosque were constructed by the emperor of Kashmir, Sultan Sadruddin, for Hazrat Bulbul Shah. A library was attached to this mosque. Amir Kabir Syed Hamdani, a theologian and scholar had a well established personal library that contained Oriental literature. He established a number of libraries in Kashmir which added to the wealth of the Indian Oriental libraries. The [Sultans of Kashmir](#) had given funds to establish madrasas and libraries. Each madrasa had a library. Sultan Zain-ul-Abedin-ul (Maroof-Beh, who was famously know as "Badshah," "the great emperor") constructed a library which historians tell was one of the best in the world. Among the other libraries built by Budshah, Darul-ul-Uloom Nausherah was the best. Another library, by the name of Madrasa-i-Sher, was built by Budshah near modern Islamabad. During the Chak Sultanate many libraries thrived and brought Oriental literature to the limelight. Akbar conquered Kashmir in 1587 and established many madrasas and libraries there. In Gujrat and Malwa, a number of libraries were introduced by Ahmad Shah I and Dilawar Khan.

[Shah Jahan](#) (1658-1667), like his predecessors, patronized learning and education and built a library with a rich collection of Arabic and Persian manuscripts. [Dara Shikkoh](#), Aurangzeb, and Bahadur Shah Zafar also contributed to the development of Oriental libraries.

Mughal rule was a period of literary excellence. Most of the emperors were themselves scholars, and also extended their patronage to scholarship and learning.

Other Kingdoms

There were kingdoms in other parts of India that also had libraries enriched by Oriental literature. The kingdoms of [Bahmani](#) and [Deccan](#) had independent kings who reigned for 340 years, and who were patrons of learning, as were the Bahmani kings, who continued their rule up to 1526 AD and had an empire that stretched from coast to coast. They founded many colleges and libraries. Ahmad Shah built a magnificent college near [Gulbarga](#). Muhammad Shah Bahmani II built another imposing college at [Bidar](#) that is one of the many beautiful remains of the grandeur of the Bahmanis. All these colleges had libraries that possessed an enormous amount of Oriental literature. Arabian and Iranian literature brought by visitors and travelers were added to the libraries of Bahmanis. The Urdu language was at its zenith during the reign of Firoz Shah Bahmani, and a vast amount of Urdu literature enriched the Bahmani Libraries. The library of Gesudaraj was distinguished among the libraries of Deccan. Books on Sufism and religion were available in this library. The emperors of [Qutub Shahi](#) also established a good number of libraries during their reign, and a vast amount of literature in Persian was included.

[Tipu Sultan](#), son of Haider Ali and emperor of Mysore established a number of libraries. "Zaimul-Umoor" was the great university of Seringa Patnam in his reign. He collected books from many countries including Europe. The library had a copy of the Holy Quran which was written by the hand of [Aurangzeb Alamgir](#). It is estimated that the library had nearly 2,000 volumes of Persian, Arabic, and Hindi manuscripts from all branches of Islamic literature (Zobair, 1978).

After the downfall of the Mughals, and with the invasion of [Ahmad Shah Abdali](#), the literary wealth of the Indian libraries was looted away. In 1857, after the [Sepoy mutiny](#), thousands of books were destroyed and thousands of important, valuable, and rare books were siphoned to England.

British and Other Europeans

The growth and development of Oriental libraries was regenerated again during European and British rule. The interest shown by the British and European scholars in Oriental Learning and Indology, along with the social, cultural and religious movements spearheaded by eminent Indians, resulted in new Oriental libraries. These institutions established libraries for Oriental scholarship. The result of this renaissance is a number of special libraries devoted to Oriental and Indological collections in various parts of the country.

[Rampur Raza Library](#), very rich in Indo-Islamic studies and arts, was created by Nawab Faizullah Khan in 1794, and has tremendous manuscript wealth. One can find manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit, Sinhali, Tamil, Kannada, and other Oriental languages.

The [Asiatic Society Library](#), Kolkatta, a premier and leading oriental institutions of the country was established in 1784 by Sir William Jones (Ali, 2004). Colonel Mackenzie, an Englishman and an engineer by profession established an Oriental Library by the name of “[Government Oriental Manuscript Library \(GOML\)](#)” in Chennai.

Contemporary Libraries

[Khuda Baksh Oriental Library](#) was founded in 1842 by Maulvi Khuda Baksh Khan, who donated his entire personal collection. Since 1977 it has been issuing regularly a multi-lingual research quarterly [Khuda Baksh Library Journal](#). The library has been recognized as a research center by seven Indian universities. The collection has a rich repository of Persian and Arabic manuscripts (Ali, 2004).

Maulana Azad Library, [Aligarh Muslim University](#) was initially founded as “Anglo Oriental College (MAOC) at Aligarh in 1875 and raised to the status of a university in 1920 (Ali, 2004). The personal collection of Maulana Azad also enriches the library. The library has a total collection of over 1 million volumes and 14,571 manuscripts. The Maulana Azad Library has the largest collection of Urdu books in the Indian subcontinent, which is perhaps largest in the world as well. The collection includes:

- Urdu
- Arabic
- Persian
- Sanskrit
- Hindi
- Sir Syed Collection
- Gandhian Collection
- Aligarh Collection
- Thesis Collection
- Archives
- Microfiche
- Manuscripts

Hakim Mohammad Syed Library, Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi is a leading university founded in 1906. It has a well known Oriental library, which has a number of special collections:

- Nazaria Collection
- Abdul Sattar Siddiqui Collection

- Maulana Abdul Salam Niazi Collection
- Jaffri Collection
- Shafi Ahmad Collection
- Dr Tanveer Alvi Collection

Nearly 90% of these collections are in Urdu, Arabic and Persian languages, while the remaining 10% are in English, Hindi, and Sanskrit. The library has 4,500 rare manuscripts.

Osmania University Library was established in 1918 and is considered seventh oldest in India, the third oldest in South India, and the first to be established in state of Hyderabad. The library has a collection of rare books and manuscripts including Palm Leaf manuscripts.

The National Library of India, which came in to existence in 1948, is the largest library in India. Previously it was known as the Imperial Library which was formed in 1891 by combining a number of Secretariat libraries. It has a wide range of collections in a variety of national and international languages. A good number of Arabic and Persian documents are also available here.

The Oriental library initiative that took place in ancient India reached its zenith in the period when the British and other Europeans came to India. The Mughals also contributed a great deal to the development of Oriental libraries. Eventually, their extravagant ways caused the libraries to deteriorate, but social and political conditions eventually led to better libraries with larger collections.

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